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Former LB employee sentenced for theft

COURTS: Employee stole \$600,000 from Animal Care Services Bureau.

By Tracy Manzer Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — A former Long Beach city employee was sentenced to three years in state prison and ordered to repay the city \$600,000 she stole from the Animal Care Services Bureau during her career with the department.

Jongluck Mutrais, 59, pleaded guilty to the theft of more than \$600,000 in public funds, a felony that requires state prison time, said Deputy District Attorney Dana Aratani of the Public Integrity Division.

"We wanted both state prison time and restitution," Aratani said of the plea agreement. "It is important, because we are dealing with the theft of public funds ... and because that is the charge ... Ms. Mutrais cannot qualify for realignment."

The prison realignment process, signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown last year, allows nearly all nonviolent prison inmates to transfer to county jails. And due to the overcrowding in Los Angeles County Jail facilities, inmates often serve very little of the time ordered, the prosecutor said.

Mutrais, however, is state-prison bound, Aratani stressed.

And the importance of the theft of the public money was driven home by two Animal Care workers, one former and the other current, who attended the sentencing Wednesday and who told the court the theft made it impossible for the cash-strapped department to hire badly needed employees and hastened the deaths of animals the city could not afford to house in its shelter.

"This may seem trivial to some, but it is important for those of us who ... have dedicated ourselves to the protection of animals," said Michelle Quigley, who served as a lieutenant in charge of Long Beach Animal Care Services Bureau until her recent retirement, and who now works for the SPCA.

"How many animals had to perish through euthanasia because of the missing funds?" Quigley asked. "I hope you remember their faces. I know I remember every one."

In addition to her guilty plea to embezzling public funds, Mutrais admitted allegations that the amount exceeded \$100,000. That means that after authorities seize Mutrais' bank accounts and properties, what remains of the \$648,194 owed to the city and the state franchise tax board becomes an automatic civil judgment against the convicted embezzler and any future money earned can be subject to garnishment.

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nishment, Aratani said.

The diminutive defendant did not offer an apology nor did she give an explanation for the crime, saying only "yes" when asked if she agreed to waive her rights to challenge the seizure of her accounts and homes at a hearing scheduled for Oct. 16.

Los Angeles Superior Court Commissioner Robert Kawahara on Wednesday ordered the seizure of two of her bank accounts, one at Farmers & Merchants Bank in Long Beach and the other at the Long Beach City Employees Federal Credit Union, estimated to have less than \$20,000, and a home Mutrais owns in Orange.

The possible seizure of a third bank account and a home in Las Vegas, which are in both Mutrais' and another woman's name will be determined at next month's hearing. Though Mutrais agreed to relinquish her rights to all property and accounts, the other woman — identified as Grace Goheco — has a right to due process and to chal-

lenge the seizure, the prosecutor explained.

A third property in Las Vegas was considered for seizure, but Aratani said authorities declined to pursue the sale of that home after finding the liens against it far exceeded the property's value.

Mutrais, who has been in custody since her arrest on May 10, was also given credit for her time served.

The restitution amount was based in part on an investigation into an 11-month period, between Oct. 1, 2009, and Sept. 1, 2010. During that time, Long Beach Police Department Forgery and Fraud detectives and the DA's Public Integrity Division were able to isolate and prove the theft of \$251,000, Aratani said.

The rest of the loss was proven by the city through an extensive audit, he said.

The crime came to light in August 2010, after the Animal Care Services Bureau began using a comprehensive computer system to track funds. Mutrais resigned the same month the audit was reported.

tracy.manzer@presstelegram.com, 562-714-2150, twitter.com/tmanzer